



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

DEPARTMENT OF
MENTAL HEALTH, MENTAL RETARDATION AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE SERVICES

JAMES S. REINHARD, M.D.
COMMISSIONER

Post Office Box 1797
Richmond, Virginia 23218-1797

Telephone (804) 786-3921
Voice/TDD (804) 371-8977
www.dmhmrzas.state.va.us

October 24, 2002

For Immediate Release

Contact: Stacey Atwell 804-786-1332

HELP FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS TO RECOGNIZE CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO THE RECENT SNIPER ATTACKS

VIRGINIA--Children of all ages may experience a wide range of reactions to the recent sniper attacks that are similar to the reactions they experienced in relation to 9/11 and the anniversary of 9/11, such as feeling frightened, confused, and insecure. Knowing the signs that are common at different ages can help parents and teachers to recognize problems and respond appropriately.

To help parents and teachers, the Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services offers the tips below, extracted from *After a Disaster: A Guide for Parents and Teachers* from the Center for Mental Health Services website.

Preschool Age

Children from one to five years in age find it particularly hard to adjust to change and loss. In addition, these youngsters have not yet developed their own coping skills, so they must depend on parents, family members, and teachers to help them through difficult times.

Very young children may regress to an earlier behavioral stage after a traumatic event. For example, preschoolers may resume thumbsucking or bedwetting or may become afraid of strangers, animals, darkness, or "monsters." They may cling to a parent or teacher or become very attached to a place where they feel safe. Changes in eating and sleeping habits are common, as are unexplainable aches and pains. Other symptoms to watch for are disobedience, hyperactivity, speech difficulties, and aggressive or withdrawn behavior.

Preschoolers may tell exaggerated stories about the traumatic event or may speak of it over and over.

-more-

Help for Parents and Teachers to Recognize Children's Reactions to the Recent Sniper Attacks, page 2

Early Childhood

Children aged five to eleven may have some of the same reactions as younger boys and girls. In addition, they may withdraw from play groups and friends, compete more for the attention of parents, fear going to school, allow school performance to drop, become aggressive, or find it hard to concentrate. These children may also return to "more childish" behaviors; for example, they may ask to be fed or dressed.

Adolescence

Children twelve to fourteen are likely to have vague physical complaints when under stress and may abandon chores, schoolwork, and other responsibilities they previously handled. While on the one hand they may compete vigorously for attention from parents and teachers, they may also withdraw, resist authority, become disruptive at home or in the classroom, or even begin to experiment with high-risk behaviors such as drinking or drug abuse. These young people are at a developmental stage in which the opinions of others are very important. They need to be thought of as "normal" by their friends and are less concerned about relating well with adults or participating in recreation or family activities they once enjoyed.

In later adolescence, teens may experience feelings of helplessness and guilt because they are unable to assume full adult responsibilities as the community responds. Older teens may also deny the extent of their emotional reactions to the traumatic event.

How to Help

Reassurance is the key to helping children through a traumatic time. Very young children need a lot of cuddling, as well as verbal support. Answer questions about the event honestly, but don't dwell on frightening details or allow the subject to dominate family or classroom time indefinitely. Encourage children of all ages to express emotions through conversation, drawing, or painting and to find a way to help others who were affected by the disaster.

Try to maintain a normal household or classroom routine and encourage children to participate in recreational activity. Reduce your expectations temporarily about performance in school or at home, perhaps by substituting less demanding responsibilities for normal chores.

Finally, acknowledge that you, too, may have reactions associated with the traumatic event, and take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing.

-more-

Help for Parents and Teachers to Recognize Children's Reactions to the Recent Sniper Attacks, page 3

For help with reactions to the recent sniper attacks, call the Community Resilience Project of Northern Virginia toll free at 1-866-400-2951 (TTY: 703-228-4831) or visit www.communityresilience.com or www.dmhmrzas.state.va.us for information.

###

Through a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services administers the Community Resilience Project of Northern Virginia with the Community Services Boards of the counties of Arlington, Fairfax, and Loudoun, and the city of Alexandria. The free services available through the Community Resilience Project include individual and group counseling, support groups, stress management, emergency preparedness, dealing with grief and loss, children and trauma, county services referrals, and financial or economic guidance. Services are also available to the hearing impaired. The services available through this project, established for those in the City of Alexandria and the counties of Arlington, Fairfax/Falls Church, and Loudoun who were directly and indirectly impacted by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, are available for people in these areas who have been impacted by the sniper attacks.